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SUBJECT: NIGERIA: PDP SETS PRIMARY SCHEDULE; FAILS TO RESOLVE OBASANJO/ATIKU RIFT

REF: ABUJA 2975

Classified by Ambassador Howard F. Jeter. Reasons: 1.5 (B & D)

11. (C) SUMMARY: The ruling PDP's National Executive Committee met October 31 in a failed effort to heal the Obasanjo/Atiku rift, according to Deputy House Speaker Nwuche. The Vice President's faction won the three key decisions at the four-hour meeting. First, efforts by Obasanjo's supporters to adopt the Obasanjo/Atiku ticket by consensus were rejected. Second, the session backed the legislators' proposed (and Atiku's preferred) primary timetable and, third, it nullified the requirement that candidates complete "intent to run" forms early which would have forced Atiku to make known his intentions to challenge Obasanjo. Now Atiku has more flexibility and time to decide. The inability to resolve the rift between its two top office-holders demonstrated again the strength of factionalism within the PDP. Reconciliation will prove elusive and infighting will likely grow more intense as the countdown to primaries and the party convention approaches. End Summary.

12. (C) The ruling People's Democratic Party (PDP) National Executive Committee (NEC) October 31 meeting failed to heal the political rift between President Olusegun Obasanjo and Vice President Atiku Abubakar. During a private breakfast meeting at the Ambassador's Residence the following day, Deputy Speaker of the House of Representatives Chibudom Nwuche told Ambassador Jeter that Obasanjo and Atiku communicate only through "surrogates," and the gap between the two appeared to be widening. During the NEC meeting, attended by Obasanjo, Atiku, senators, governors and party officials past and present, the NEC rejected a proposal by Edo State Governor Igbegnon to adopt Obasanjo and Atiku (as well as all sitting governors and their deputies) as consensus candidates for the anticipated 2003 elections.

13. (C) Nwuche further said the NEC also rejected the President's efforts to hold the presidential primary before the other national and state primaries. Obasanjo had hoped to win his presidential spot then use this secured position to promote his choices for legislative and gubernatorial nominations. Moreover, with Obasanjo securing his place first, the contestants in the other races would need his support and, in the process, be obliged to promise their loyalty. At the end of the NEC meeting, however, PDP Chairman Audu Ogbeh announced that the party's primaries would commence mid-December starting with nominations for the State Houses of Assembly; no timetable for the subsequent primaries was announced.

14. (C) In a related development, the PDP also adopted guidelines for nominations, setting fees for potential candidates, starting at five million Naira (38 thousand dollars) for President and dropping to 100,000 Naira (820 dollars) for State Houses of Assembly. To encourage female candidates, PDP Chairman Ogbeh announced that the fees would be waived for women. Adding further to the uncertainty surrounding the process, the NEC also eliminated the deadline for potential candidates to declare their intentions by mid-November - a gambit designed to flush out Atiku. Instead, candidates will be able to file until the eve of the primaries.

15. (C) COMMENT: The PDP was yet again unable to resolve the differences between the President and his Vice. The Vice President's forces emerged from the NEC strengthened, with Obasanjo's weaknesses evident. Unable to get himself selected as a consensus candidate, Obasanjo now must temper himself for a tough fight for the nomination, with Atiku as one likely, if late, challenger. The primary timetable and the elimination of the filing deadline serve Atiku's interests, giving him the chance to assess his chances and delay announcing his candidacy until the last minute before

directly challenging Obasanjo. The indirect challenge will take shape around the primary process, with each campaign turning into a miniature test of strength between Obasanjo, on the one hand, and Atiku and other challengers, on the other.

ANDREWS